

The Grassroots Support Project

The Southern Rural Development Initiative (SRDI) works to increase income, assets, and racial equity in regions of the rural South with persistent poverty. Specifically, we focus on strengthening asset based economic development efforts that respect, honor, and preserve local culture, heritage and the natural environment while simultaneously working to resolve the crippling legacy of racism and other oppressions in the rural South. To that end, we concentrate our expertise on four critical areas of community development infrastructure:

- Grassroots Support Organizing
- Rural Policy
- Race and Rural Communities
- Community-Based Philanthropy

SRDI increases the power of existing organizations to affect change by creating and sustaining strategic networks and facilitating new connections between external resources and regional work. Our goal is to catalyze systems of change and to create the necessary infrastructure to sustain those systems. We carry out this work by strengthening anchor organizations, building networks, and developing strong connections to resources and information. SRDI is particularly committed to building the capacity and power of its grassroots constituency. Grassroots organizations directly represent communities suffering the consequences of poverty and injustice. However, these organizations often lack strong organizational capacity. It is critical to our strategy that grassroots leaders are empowered with knowledge, skill, organized constituencies, financial resources, and organizational capacity. This paper outlines SRDI's work to strengthen grassroots leaders, groups, and networks working toward economic and racial justice in the rural South. We call this work *The Grassroots Support Project*.

Grassroots Support Organizing: An effective way of organizing for racial and economic justice in the rural South. SRDI recognizes that the long-term success and sustainability of grassroots efforts requires continuous nurturing, coaching, and hands-on technical assistance from a trusted, locally-rooted, value-centered grassroots support infrastructure. SRDI has spent the past couple of years working across the rural South to lift up and strengthen organizations that are deeply engaged in building a regional infrastructure of grassroots leaders, groups, and networks that are addressing issues of racial and economic justice. Grassroots Support Organizing is a strategic effort to strengthen a region's grassroots sector, the web of community-based leaders, groups, and networks working for racial and economic justice across that region. This organizing model is carried out by *Grassroots Support Organizations* – locally rooted organizations that work every day over the long haul to (1) build strong leaders and groups that get things done locally; (2) organize multi-county grassroots networks that can address issues related to systems and policy change; and (3) connect grassroots efforts across race and class to mainstream resources, partners, and decision making roles.

*Thomas Watson: Director, Grassroots Support Project
20 Battery Park Ave., Suite 211, Asheville, NC 28801
Tele: 828-285-2946 / Email: Thomas@srdi.org*

SRDI's Grassroots Support Project works to strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of Grassroots Support Organizing efforts that respect, honor, and preserve local culture, heritage and the natural environment while simultaneously working to resolve the crippling legacy of racism and other oppressions in the rural South. Specifically, we are working to deepen the impact of rural grassroots support organizing efforts that increase income, assets, and racial equity for marginalized populations.

Grassroots Support Organizing: An effective approach to rural organizing. Grassroots Support Organizing is a long-standing viable model of organizing that is deeply connected to the pace, life, and culture of the rural South. Concretely, Grassroots Support Organizing works to build a region's grassroots sector (its web of community-based leaders, groups, and networks) by:

- Facilitating the process of building effective grassroots groups/organizations (i.e. hands-on consistent organizational development)
- Strengthening the capacities and confidence of community based leaders (i.e. leadership development)
- Connecting grassroots leaders/organizations to mainstream partners, systems, and resources (i.e. civic participation and bridging)
- Organizing grassroots networks across a geographic area (i.e. network development)

This work of strengthening and organizing the grassroots sector is crucial for rural communities. Community-based organizations are frequently the first place rural people turn when in crisis, and they often play the dual role of policy and systems advocate while addressing the daily effects of poverty, racism, and injustice. These small grassroots organizations get things done and improve communities – day in, day out, year after year.

Locally-rooted community-based organizations engage in:

- Charity or Relief Work (e.g., food pantry, clothes closet),
- Family Strengthening Work (e.g., parent's groups, women's groups),
- Development Work (e.g., income-generating projects),
- Justice-oriented Work (e.g., workers' rights, immigrants' rights),
- Systems and Policy Change (e.g., changing laws, systems accountability)

Grassroots organizations are also the hub for developing community-based leadership, fostering participation, and helping marginalized people develop a collective understanding of the larger political and systemic issues that maintain poverty and racism in the rural South. Building regional networks of these community-based organizations allows for peer learning and solidarity that strengthen individual organizations and leaders while simultaneously building the collective power needed to bring about broad-scale, fundamental change. In sum, Grassroots Support Organizing is an approach that sees the grassroots sector as a sustainable base from which rural regions can improve local communities while also working toward broad, fundamental change.

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Grassroots Support Organizing: Creating multiple levels of results. Through their participation in groups and networks, grassroots leaders learn from each other, build strong relationships and trust, create a shared vision for their region, and build the collective power to create fundamental change. Specifically, grassroots support organizing leads to concrete results:

- **Grassroots leaders** experience individual or personal results (e.g., more confidence, skills, and knowledge for running groups and creating community change)
- **Grassroots groups/organizations** create sustainable local community change and systems change, change that is rooted in people's daily realities (e.g., after-school programs that improve children's test scores, the local farmers group starts a market)
- **Grassroots networks** generate results around broader policy and systems change at a regional or statewide level (e.g., a new policy related to how heritage tourism dollars are allocated at a state level, large rallies designed to effect federal policy around comprehensive immigration reform)
- **Partnerships** between grassroots leaders/groups and non-grassroots systems and organizations generate results around more effective services or resource distribution (e.g., more interpreters at a health department for non-English speakers)

Together the results of grassroots support organizing add up to comprehensive and sustainable community change for rural communities.

Components of Grassroots Support Organizing. SRDI did an analysis of Grassroots Support Organizing across the rural South by conducting over 70 one-on-one interviews. In addition, we are deeply engaged in strengthening Grassroots Support Organizing efforts in three sub-regions: Coastal Georgia, the Black Belt of Alabama, and East Tennessee. Based on our analysis, we have identified the necessary components for a rural region to successfully and effectively engage in Grassroots Support Organizing. These components are:

- ***A grassroots sector*** (i.e., a region's web of community-based leaders, groups, and networks)
- ***Grassroots support organizations*** (i.e., regional anchor institutions that are regularly involved in hands-on work of strengthening the grassroots sector over the long haul)
- ***Grassroots support services*** (i.e., organizations that lend a hand and have a lot to offer the grassroots sector but are not in the community every day)
- ***Mainstream entities*** (e.g., foundations, public agencies, and / or government entities that are committed to poverty alleviation and justice)

Many places in the South have these components; others do not. Even when these components exist, we have found that they have limited capacity, lack regional coordination and integration, suffer from isolation and inadequate support, and struggle to maintain funding.

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What SRDI does: Strengthening and integrating these components. SRDI works in partnership with anchor grassroots support organizations to strengthen and integrate the components of Grassroots Support Organizing. The term *partnership* in the sentence above is important. It is our belief that local Grassroots Support Organizations (GSOs) doing the daily work – not outside experts – know best how to impact their communities, their organizations, and themselves. We work hand-in-hand with GSO partners to accelerate their local work. We teach and learn together, and help each other accomplish longer-term, mutually defined results. Concretely, The Grassroots Support Project works to promote and strengthen grassroots support organizing efforts in the rural South by:

1. Strengthening the effectiveness and sustainability of anchor Grassroots Support Organizations (GSOs) to ensure that rural community-based efforts working toward economic and racial justice have consistent support, access to peer-networks, and connections to mainstream partners.

- *SRDI focuses on strengthening the long-term internal effectiveness and sustainability of GSOs as organizations (e.g., facilitating and consulting around board development, strategic planning). SRDI has helped McIntosh SEED, a coastal Georgia GSO, become a more effective, focused, and sustainable organization by strengthening and expanding its board, developing year-long plans, creating evaluation tools and processes, strengthening their staff leadership, developing fundraising plans and grant proposals, and helping them clarify their role and work as a GSO.*
- *SRDI focuses on the daily, long-term work of supporting and strengthening the programmatic work of anchor GSOs (e.g., working hand-in-hand as GSOs build regional networks of grassroots groups). SRDI has worked with the Black Belt Community Foundation to develop a network of African American heritage and cultural tourism groups across the Black Belt.*

2. Developing authentic relationships among rural Grassroots Support Organizations for mutual learning, the development of shared tools and processes, and regional strategic alignment.

- *In partnership with Heifer International, SRDI hosted the first Southeastern GSO gathering in September 2007 (attended by 50 people representing 8 anchor GSO's, 25 grassroots organizations, and 7 multi-county networks). We are now working to develop peer site visits and promote authentic relationships among anchor GSO leaders.*

- 3. Linking grassroots support resources across multiple-county regions (i.e., nonprofit intermediaries, consultants, colleges, funders) to create an integrated “system of support” for nurturing grassroots efforts.**
 - *SRDI and anchor GSOs work together to create what we call an integrated multi-county system of support, where grassroots support organizations and grassroots support services are more connected, coordinated, efficient, and effective. SRDI and the Community Economic Development Network of East Tennessee (CEDNET), an anchor GSO, conducted a needs assessment with around 25 grassroots groups, which identified 14 different grassroots support services throughout East Tennessee (i.e., University of Tennessee, East TN Community Foundation). We are now working in partnership to bring together these 14 different support organizations to understand each others’ work, build stronger relationships, and explore possible ways to coordinate resources.*

- 4. Increasing the financial sustainability of rural grassroots work through developing new forms of philanthropy, seeking opportunities to access state and federal funds, bridging regional grassroots efforts to national funders, and exploring innovative ways to generate income.**
 - *SRDI and anchor GSOs work together to foster grassroots philanthropic efforts (e.g., giving circles), increase regional and national funding to support rural grassroots efforts, and seek out opportunities to access state and federal funds. SRDI is currently working with Hindsight Consulting and McIntosh SEED to develop an African American giving circle in coastal Georgia.*

- 5. Promoting grassroots policy and systems change through hands-on research, data gathering, training, and strategy development.**
 - *Through our Federal Funds data tool, training and hands-on support, SRDI is working with McIntosh SEED to analyze the flow of federal and state funding and create a plan of action to advocate for the alignment of these funding streams with local asset-based development and racial equity goals.*

- 6. Bridging grassroots efforts across race, class, and systems to mainstream resources, partners, and decision making roles.**
 - *SRDI is partnering with McIntosh SEED on the Rural Community Investment Project, an effort to create a rural Community Benefit Agreement between a mainstream housing developer and an African American Community Association.*

- 7. Informing the national fields of community organizing and rural development by evaluating, documenting, and distributing the best practices, tools, and lessons learned from all of this work.**
 - *In partnership with the emerging network of GSO’s, SRDI is documenting the building blocks, tools, and best practices of Grassroots Support Organizing for national level distribution and presentation.*

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So what? Long-term results of Grassroots Support Organizing. The overall purpose of SRDI's Grassroots Support Project is to deepen the impact of community-based efforts working to increase income, assets, and racial equity in the rural South. There are several different levels of results from this work (which were mentioned above): grassroots leaders, groups are more effective, sustainable, and connected; anchor GSOs are stronger and do their work better; the field of grassroots support organizing is recognized; there are increased resources to support this work; and so on. But our primary focus is on the results that directly reduce poverty and address systematic oppressions, the results that directly touch the lives of people living in low-wealth communities. We see these results at three levels:

- 1. Local communities:** More sustainable and effective grassroots leaders and groups work daily on the ground to improve a local community and help meet the needs of low-wealth people. Picture a local family resource center in Greenville, Tennessee that provides a food pantry, runs parenting education classes, and holds workers' rights workshops.
- 2. Multi-county regions:** Grassroots leaders and groups come together across 5 to 20 counties in a rural area to build the collective power needed to address multi-county issues related to policy and systems change. Picture a regional network of African American heritage and cultural tourism groups working across Coastal Georgia to shape a \$10 million dollar federal appropriation to preserve and promote Gullah-Geechee heritage.
- 3. The South:** Grassroots networks from across the South come together to build the collective power needed to address issues related to policy and systems change across the South. Envision 10 anchor GSOs across the South, each of which has built a multi-county small farmers' network; each network consists of 10-12 small farmers' groups that have 25 farmers – that's 100-plus grassroots farmers' groups (and more than 2,500 small farmers) that could come together from across the rural South to shape federal legislation, such as the renewal of the Farm Bill.

Conclusion. Grassroots Support Organizing focuses on strengthening local grassroots efforts, building multi-county networks, and linking grassroots efforts to mainstream partners, resources, and decision making roles. SRDI's Grassroots Support Project works to develop and strengthen this emerging field of rural organizing. We do this work because we believe that the long-term health of the rural South depends upon people in marginalized communities coming together to develop grassroots structures that give them the individual and collective power to improve local communities, develop grassroots economies, address issues of oppression, and influence mainstream policies and systems. SRDI and our partners want to ensure that grassroots leaders, groups, and networks have the necessary support, connections, and resources to move their efforts to scale and sustain this important work over the long-haul.

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Three Year Grassroots Support Project Anticipated Results and Indicators

Objectives (Results)	Indicators
Grassroots leaders, organizations, and networks within five multi-county rural regions are more sustainable and effective at reducing poverty and addresses issues of oppression in the rural South.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grassroots leaders, organizations, and networks have access to locally rooted, consistent hands-on development support • Grassroots organizations increase internal capacity: plans, evaluation methods, stronger Boards, etc. • Grassroots leaders have enhanced skills, knowledge, and confidence • Resources available to rural grassroots efforts increase • Regional peer learning networks of grassroots organizations exist • Grassroots economic development efforts will see and increase in income and support • Grassroots networks are having impact on local, state, and federal policies • Grassroots leaders and networks are connected across the South East.
Effective, sustainable, and well networked Grassroots Support Anchor Organizations across five multi-county rural regions	<p>Anchor GSO's will see:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved internal organizational effectiveness: program evaluation, strategic plans, stronger board of directors • Increased financial resources through new forms of philanthropy, new foundation support, and income generation efforts • Rise in the effectiveness in the delivery of programs targeted at strengthening grassroots leaders, groups, and networks • Programmatic and strategic linkages between participating grassroots support organizations
Effective and well-networked Grassroots Support practitioners within five multi-county rural regions	<p>GSO Practitioners will have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional tools, strategies, and knowledge • Stronger peer relationships within their sub-regions and across the Southeast • Access to broad range of information regarding best practices, innovative models, and tools
An integrated “System of Support” for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grassroots leaders, groups, and networks in

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<p>nurturing grassroots efforts exists in five multi-county rural regions.</p>	<p>each sub-region have access to consistent, high quality organizational, leaderships, and network development support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linkages and authentic peer relationships between GSO's within and across each sub-region • Each target region experiences increased coordination between grassroots support organizations • Stronger relationships between grassroots support organizations and funders within each target region • A common evaluation framework and process for understanding the effectiveness of grassroots support work and its impact on grassroots leaders, groups, and networks is created and utilized in each sub-region.
<p>The field of Grassroots Support Organizing is recognized by funders and rural community practitioners as a viable rural development strategy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The articulation, publication, and distribution of the grassroots support organizing model • The number of national presentations on Grassroots Support Organizing • The increase in the number of nonprofits in the rural South who identify themselves as grassroots support organizations • The increase in funding among anchor GSO's • The GSO language is used by wide variety of funders and nonprofits
<p>Increased resources to support rural grassroots efforts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The amount raised through giving circles and/or other new forms of philanthropy, • The increase in regional funding for grassroots efforts within targeted regions • The increase in national funding for grassroots efforts in targeted rural regions, • Stronger relationships between grassroots support organizations and funders within each target region